

2/10/10

George Malek, Central Vermont Chamber of Commerce, Washington Cnty – plus.
Association of 400 area employers that employ a total of approx 7,000 residents.

Published community and demographic data since 1987 with a special focus on age and household demographics that affect housing and changes in the workforce.

Senator Lyons and Senate Natural Resources Committee,

Since we all have plenty of time and little else to do today, let me recap Washington County housing trends for the last 100 years or so.

From 1900 to 1930 the majority of new housing in the county was built in Montpelier and Barre. For the next 30 years more than 40 percent of the new housing was built in the cities. Since 1960, the percentage of new housing built in the cities has steadily declined so that today nearly 75 percent of Washington County's housing is built not only outside Montpelier and Barre but outside Northfield and Waterbury villages (sewered areas) as well.

I could provide a whole collection of charts, maps and assorted visuals to confirm this information, but since S.99 was written to slow or halt the current trend, I won't spend the extra time. I suspect we can all agree that from a land-use perspective, it would be great to turn the calendar back to 1930.

Since the dramatic turn in the 1960's, we've passed Act 250 and Act 200 were intended to address this issue among others. S. 99 is yet another attempt to slow, limit or halt construction of homes in "the rural countryside."

It won't work. Creating obstacles to the construction of new housing has done two things. First, it has artificially pushed the cost of all housing upward at unsustainable rates. Secondly, it has created huge barriers for small – read that "typical Vermont" – developers to create moderately priced – read that one "workforce" housing.

Contractors avoid act 250 review by building just a couple units. They build more expensive homes with greater profit margins, and consequently they consume even more land than they would consume otherwise.

Until two years ago, about the only thing that has been increasing in price faster than health insurance premiums was housing prices. Right now the pressure for housing is greatly reduced, but prices remain relatively strong. Even with young adults living with family or crowding into an extra bedroom with a friend housing prices have not fallen sharply.

These young workers would rather be in their own place, and when the economy allows them to, they will want housing. If it isn't available – and affordable – in Vermont, they will leave. We've seen plenty of that in past few decades, and we'll see even more, even faster in the decade ahead.

The Chamber understands, and to a large degree shares, the concerns of S.99's supporters. Unfortunately, passage of this bill would be case of "the cure" being worse than the disease.

We need housing. We need housing that working Vermonters can afford. We need houses and apartments on municipal sewer so that multiple units can be built per acre. But we can't get them by prohibiting elsewhere. We won't get them by scaring developers into building a couple McMansions in each rural town.

Making development of modest rural housing a high-risk enterprise subject new interpretations of new criteria being held to new, evolving standards may prevent construction, but it won't improve the quality of life for Vermonters.

I urge you to redouble your efforts to encourage construction in existing settlements by making it easier to be designated a growth center, by increasing the ease and number of tax increment financing districts so that new infrastructure and new development is more attractive in and around existing settlements.

We have a housing shortage. It has not gone away. It has merely gone underground these past 18 months. And it will rise again. We will either be able to meet the demand or we risk losing the next generation of Vermonters.

Thank you.
George

2/9/10

Chairman Robert Starr and Senate Committee on Education,

I'm George Malek, Executive Vice President of the Central Vermont Chamber of Commerce. The Central Vermont Chamber is an association of businesses and employers that employs a total of more than 7,000 residents in and around Washington County.

There are numerous reasons to establish consistent regional, if not statewide, school calendars. Some are significant, some rather minor. A few of these, in no particular order, are:

Summer employment of students in the hospitality industry – As you have probably heard from many, hospitality businesses need their summer employees to Labor Day. Students who return to school prior to Labor Day may find that they are less appealing to employers. If not hired, they not only lose income, but also interpersonal skill development opportunities and experience in a sector that is often hiring.

Quality of Education for Technical Centers – Sam Matthews of our EDC has addressed this issue in some detail. Suffice it to say that the Chamber is also concerned with the educational opportunities lost when students of some schools must miss class time because their calendar differs from others.

Mom & Pop employment of students – Small businesses, especially convenience stores and shops catering to youthful customers, are challenged when the student(s) they employ are in school when neighborhood children have days or weeks off. When sales are brisk, their student employee may be unavailable.

Working parents of students – Employed parents may take a personal day or be somewhat distracted at work when children are at home for the day. If they have children in more than one school (most often union school district or high school choice towns) this situation is compounded. (Educators are often working parents whose children may be on different school calendars unnecessarily.)

Consolidation – The Chamber strongly supports cost savings and educational improvements through consolidation (and school choice), and I would welcome the opportunity address the committee on this topic whenever appropriate.

However, it would seem that debating the pros, cons and prospects of merging school districts or superintendencies is little more than an academic exercise if we can't even establish regional school calendars. There seems to be little that favors separate calendars other than "we're different" or "local control" – the same issues that will be brought to bear on any consolidation debate.

I thank you for this opportunity to address the committee.